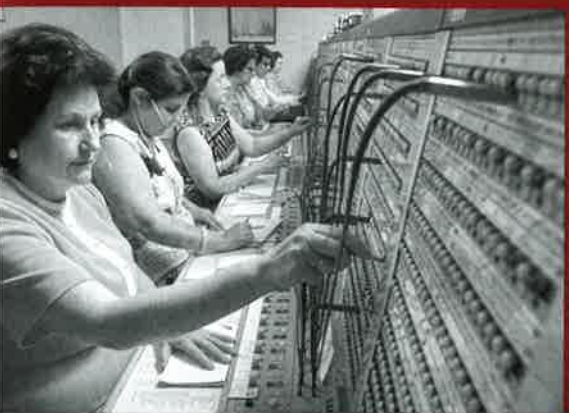
The Work of the White House Is Never Done

THE WHITE HOUSE
HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

Ever since John and Abigail Adams became the Executive Mansion's first residents in 1800, presidents and first ladies have relied on people behind the scenes to keep the home running smoothly for themselves, their families, and their distinguished guests.



A housekeeper cleans the Yellow Oval Room during the Kennedy presidency.
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A Herculean Effort: Keeping the White House Clean and Pressed

Just keeping the White House clean requires near-constant work. During the presidency of Franklin D. Roosevelt, staff polished all the floors and vacuumed all the rugs every day. They even hand-washed and waxed the kitchen floor each night. Housemaid and seamstress Lillian Rogers Parks recalled counting and folding tea napkins "two and three hundred" at a time for First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt's many teas. Annual East Room chandelier cleanings took a full week, as each glass prism had to be removed, washed, polished, and rehung.

Lillian Rogers Parks holds a portrait of her mother, Maggie Rogers, who came to the White House in 1909 under President William Howard Taft.

© Roland Freeman, Smithsonian Institution

Henrietta Nesbitt
© Library of Congress

James Bernard West
© Robert Knudsen, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston

From Chicken Salad to Unfrosted Cakes

As you'll read in your letter, White House Housekeeper Henrietta Nesbitt famously replaced chicken à la king with chicken salad for President Franklin D. Roosevelt's final inaugural luncheon in 1945. Though the meal was lighter, there was still plenty of work for the kitchen staff. The 2,000 guests consumed a salad made from 200 chickens, along with 170 dozen rolls, and 165 unfrosted cakes (sugar and butter were rationed). Since the 1960s, the kitchen has been run by an executive chef, supported by a team of sous chefs, pastry chefs, and others.

Finding the Perfect Night's Sleep for Churchill

James Bernard "J.B." West, who rose to the position of chief usher, ensured presidents and their guests were comfortable throughout his nearly thirty years of service. As the Executive Mansion's general manager, he worked with countless notable figures, including British Prime Minister Winston Churchill. During a World War II visit, Churchill struggled to find a comfortable mattress that would let him rest before meetings with President Roosevelt. Mr. West patiently assisted as the prime minister tried out several mattresses until he found one that was just right.

Dwight Eisenhower called John Moaney his "irreplaceable man."
© Eisenhower National Historic Site

Delores and John Moaney, 1953
Courtesy of Delores Moaney
© Eisenhower National Historic Site

The Loyal Valet

The phrase "No man is a hero to his valet" could not be applied to John Moaney, General Dwight D. Eisenhower's valet. Moaney was assigned to the 751st Quartermaster Company of the U.S. Army and later transferred to the General's personal staff. After the war, Moaney remained loyal to General Eisenhower, following him from post to post. When Eisenhower was elected president in 1952, Moaney and his wife joined the first family in the White House. As President Eisenhower's valet, Moaney cared for the president's clothes, awakened the president in the morning, reminded him of the day's schedule, packed the luggage for trips, and prepared the ingredients for Eisenhower to make his homemade vegetable soup. His wife, Delores, worked in the White House kitchen. In addition, John Moaney ran the projector on movie night and even shagged golf balls while Ike practiced his drive. Loyal to the end, the Moaneys continued caring for Ike and First Lady Mamie Eisenhower long after retirement, and they tended to Mrs. Eisenhower for five more years after Ike's death in 1969.

White House chauffeurs, including Francis H. Robinson (far left)
© Library of Congress

Hitting the Road: A Half a Million Miles

In the early 1900s, motor vehicles replaced horses as the primary mode of presidential transportation. Francis H. Robinson was hired in 1910 as the White House chauffeur, making sure President William Howard Taft got safely from place to place. Serving six presidents for nearly 30 years, Robinson racked up about 500,000 miles driving across the country.

Black and white drawing is of the White House from the southeast, ca. 1828-1833.
© White House Historical Association

Gardening on the White House Grounds

President Thomas Jefferson created the first plans for the White House Grounds. Years later, in 1825, John Ousley began his 27-year tenure as the mansion's gardener. Ousley had a deep knowledge of different plants — President John Quincy Adams called him "my living dictionary" — and he tended both beautiful flower beds and a productive kitchen garden. During the Civil War, the garden's fruits and vegetables were used to feed wounded soldiers.

Unsung.
Unseen.
Unforgotten.

White House history is about so much more than just the mansion itself. It's about the people behind the symbol — and not just the presidents and first families, but also the staff who make the Executive Mansion function. Help ensure their service is remembered — not just in history books, but in the living story of our nation.

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Top left: President Reagan Receives a Haircut in the West Wing Barber Shop © Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum/NARA; Top right: White House Messenger Edgar R. Beckley © Library of Congress; Bottom left: White House Switchboard Operators © White House Historical Association; Bottom right: Food Preparations in the White House Kitchen © White House Historical Association